

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 20 January, 2002

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Well, it looks as if the second half of the Academic Year is in our immediate future...so instead of an Opening Prayer in this newsletter, I thought I'd share with you a letter written by the 13th century educator, St. Thomas Aquinas, to a young friend of his.

It's a bit long, but it has some nice thoughts in it.

Here goes:

Dear John:

Because you are so dear to me in the Lord, I shall try to answer your request about the best way of making progress with your studies. At the outset, let me counsel you not to plunge at once into the sea of knowledge but go in by little streams. We get to the bottom of difficult truths by first mastering the easy ones. Here is what I suggest:

- 1) Be slow to speak; and don't frequent those places where people do a lot of talking. Rather, stay in your own room and try to make it a place of covenant with your Lord. Remember that by devoting yourself to regular prayer, you will be able to preserve that precious thing we call purity of conscience.
- 2) Be a gentleman at all times. Don't be too inquisitive about the affairs of others; and don't be too familiar, because over-familiarity breeds contempt, and it certainly interferes with the spirit of genuine study.
- 3) Be careful not to mix in with the speech or actions of worldly-minded people. Above all, shun useless arguments. Take the saints and the good people around you as your models.
- 4) It's not the teacher so much as the truth he expounds that counts. Don't be prejudiced by the sources of your information, but whenever something good is said, commit it fast to memory.
- 5) Be sure you clear up all doubts about the subjects you are studying. Like a man who wants to fill a vessel, be eager to fill your mind with every possible item of useful knowledge. But here once more, I caution you against seeking the type of knowledge that is beyond your power of understanding...

If you follow these simple rules, my dear John, I assure you that the thing you want most - to be a good student - will be your reward.

Faternally yours,

Thomas of Aquin

(Opusculum 61)

Best wishes for an eminently successful Second Semester!!

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

NO 1715 MASS

Because of the holiday weekend, there will be NO 1715 Mass in Washington Hall on Sunday (20 Jan).

NO 0630 MASS

Because of the holiday on Monday, there will be NO 0630 Mass in the Chaplain's Office on Monday morning (21 Jan).

WINTER RETREAT

The Catholic Chaplains will be offering a

CADET WINTER RETREAT

over the weekend of 1-2-3 February. It'll be a chance for any cadet to get away for some prayer and also some relaxation. The RETREAT will be held at Presentation Center Retreat House in New Windsor. Donation of \$25. will cover private room, meals, pizzas, etc.

Watch for more information soon through your Company Catholic Rep.

DID YOU GET ENGAGED?

If MARRIAGE is in your near future, then please keep in mind the Spring "Pre-Cana" (marriage preparation weekend). "Pre-Cana" is a requirement for Catholics who marry. It will be held over the weekend of 13-14 April. For more info, please contact us in the Chaplain's Office.

MINISTRY WORKSHOP

If you want to be trained as a Eucharistic Minister or Lector or Usher, there will be a training session at the Chapel on Tuesday, 29 January, at 1900. All you have to do is show up.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sunday (20 Jan) is the Feast of ST. SEBASTIAN.

Since he's the Patron Saint of ORDNANCE (and, along with St. Martin of Tours, has been considered one of the patrons of soldiers in general), I thought I'd offer a sketch of what's known about him.

According to traditions, he was a Roman soldier who became a Christian and was killed for his faith.

References to him can be found in Church documents ("Depositio martyrum" - "The Burial of the Martyrs") as early as AD 350. This particular document mentions that he was buried in the catacombs under the Church of St. Sebastian on the Appian Way in Rome.

Devotion to him spread quickly, and he was soon mentioned in other lists of Early Church martyrs. St. Ambrose, who died in AD 397, claimed that he was a native of Milan and suffered during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian (around AD 300).

There's a written work from somewhere around AD 450 called "Passio Sancti Sebastiani" ("The Suffering of St. Sebastian"), probably the work of a monk from a monastery located near those catacombs where Sebastian is supposedly buried.

According to this "Passio", Sebastian was an Army officer who was condemned to death for being a Christian. His punishment was to be shot with arrows by his fellow-soldiers. He was then buried in the catacombs "near the remains of the Apostles".

In Renaissance times, he was portrayed as an older soldier, then as a young man with prominent muscles, then as a heroic figure standing before the archers. In earliest representations, he is shown as a bearded Roman warrior, then as a clean-shaven young man.

There's even a legend that he recovered from his intended execution and was later beaten to death.

Anyway, that's what the traditions say. As I mentioned, he's the patron of ORDNANCE and is also patron of the National Catholic War Veterans.

Next time you're up at Most Holy Trinity, check out his stained-glass window.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

...all those who will be traveling over this holiday weekend.

...any cadet who's carrying a heavy burden these days.

...the recent casualties in Afghanistan and their families.

...all our military brothers and sisters - and their families - throughout the world, especially those in areas of risk.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I'm writing to ask a rather sensitive question...My friends and I have been having a debate concerning masturbation and pornography. Are these things illegal in the Catholic Faith? Does it center around intent, or is merely looking at pornographic pictures a sin in itself? I know the Catholic Church has made some adaptations as the years have gone by and am wondering what the current ruling is.

A: It's all a very delicate topic, especially in print...but at the same time, the topic is one which is part of everyday life for lots of people...and it certainly has a moral side...so it's good to examine exactly what's involved.

I'll start my answer by giving you the Catholic Church's moral judgment on both, as it's stated in the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" (CCC).

First, pornography:

Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the marriage act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other.

It does grave injury to the dignity of the participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others.

It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world.

It is a grave offense.

CCC, #2354

Now masturbation:

By masturbation is to be understood the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure. Both Church teaching and the moral sense have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action...

The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose.

CCC, #2352

So, both pronography and masturbation are seen by the Catholic tradition as gravely "disordered".

Here is the reason.

Quoting the "Catechism" again:

Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.

CCC, #2351

In plain English, the Church's view is that sex is a gift from God to be used for continuing the human race by bringing children into the world AND to develop the love and devotion of a man and a woman within marriage.

So, it's meant to be used for continuing life AND for creating a wonderful, loving and nurturing bond between a man and a woman within the commitment of marriage.

The Church believes that any other use of sex is "disordered"...mainly because any other use of sex defeats God's purpose. Catholic morality would see masturbation and pornography as "selfish" acts, where the sacredness and the dignity of sex are basically debased in order to bring a self-centered pleasure to individuals.

In your question, you ask the following:

Does it center around intent, or is merely looking at pornographic pictures a sin in itself?

Certainly, "intent" plays a part in any moral act, but it doesn't change the nature of the act itself. For example, looking at pornography may not produce sexual arousal, but it certainly creates an atmosphere where human dignity is lessened and where the viewer contributes to the cheapening of the sacredness of sex in the design of God.

This is called an "occasion of sin" - an atmosphere which can easily lead someone to commit sin...and to knowingly put oneself (or someone else) in an "occasion of sin" is itself a sinful act.

It makes the viewer an accomplice in doing what is wrong.

The Catholic "bottom line" in this whole topic is this: sex has to be used in the service of LIFE and LOVE according to the design of God.

And anything that deliberately frustrates the "design" of God is wrong.

That's our tradition.

Hope that answers your question.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

HELL:

What a great word...and how often it's used each day by many of us.

Of course, it's a theological concept too...and unfortunately, it's one of those ideas that has gotten really warped over the course of time.

Much of the warping is due to silly presumptions, so let's try to set the record straight.

The word "HELL" is Scandinavian in origin (Old Norse, to be precise), and it came into the English language through Old English. For them, it was a pagan concept; it referred to the "place of concealment for the dead".

For Christians, it has been used to refer to a condition of punishment and sorrow after death, a condition which is eternal.

Notice that I didn't say a "PLACE" of sorrow. That's because the word "PLACE" wouldn't be appropriate. Eternal realities are beyond time and space, and "PLACE" doesn't mean anything once you leave time and space. Similarly, HEAVEN shouldn't be referred to as a "PLACE" either, but that's another discussion.

This sounds picky, but it isn't, really. Many of our religious concepts are thought of as time-space realities, and that's no good. The spiritual life cannot ultimately be examined and judged by time-space criteria; that's why science, as we know it, is not in a position to offer any "last word" on spiritual realities.

So we shouldn't think of HELL as being any way similar to an eternal "burning building". Burning buildings are time-space realities.

Unfortunately, much of our literature (eg, Dante and his INFERNO) and many of our ideas have latched on to the fire-and-brimstone picture. They got it from the Gospels, where Jesus once used a burning dump outside Jerusalem to illustrate what he meant by "eternal desolation". Unfortunately, the "fire" part stuck, and it has often made our mental picture of HELL something a little too "material". We often miss the real significance.

The Catholic Church believes that there is indeed a condition of eternal desolation and sorrow. We use the word HELL, although other words are just as good. All of us could end up in that condition if we were to die in a state of grievous personal sin, rejecting God.

Over the centuries, there have been many arguments about this condition. Some Early Church writers argued that a God of mercy could never permit anyone to suffer ETERNAL pain. This opinion didn't catch on in the Church.

And so, the Church believes that there is such a condition as HELL: eternal deprivation of God, based on one's personal choice.

But as one recent writer said: "As Catholics, we believe that there is indeed a HELL and that's it's possible for humans to end up in that condition, but we don't have to believe that anyone is actually there."

This would be true, even for Judas.

That's an interesting concept, and it appeals to me: while we believe that it's possible to completely separate oneself from God, we are not asked to believe that anyone has actually done it.

"Judgment after death" is a mystery, and the specific details and results are a secret in the mind of God. We have some pointers, but we're in no position to comment on who is in what category, except to say simply what has been said above: whoever dies in a state of grievous personal sin, without repentance and rejecting God, consigns him- or herself to the condition that we have come to call HELL.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"Speak when you're angry,
and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret."

Ambrose Bierce

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Best wishes as you begin the 2nd Semester.
Please let me know if I can ever be of any help.
You're always in my prayers.

Woodie